

Popular Kabbalah and Contemporary Culture

SSP 100 026

Meets:

Monday	11:15AM-12:10PM	LIBRARY	213
TU/TH	11:10AM-12:30PM	LIBRARY	213

Scribner First Year Seminar – Fall, 2007

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DESCRIPTION: What is the difference between popular kabbalah and its traditional practice? Does Madonna do 'real' kabbalah? Is the kabbalah center a cult? Is Superman a Golem? In some circles, kabbalah is now used quite differently than it was in the past. At the end of the nineteenth century, artists began to use kabbalistic texts and images imaginatively as they created literature, film, comic books, and art. Emerging Jewish and non-Jewish groups and even conventional congregations now use kabbalistic texts and images as the basis for new age religious practices and popular psychology. In this way they use portions of traditional texts to generate new cosmologies and new understandings of the self. In this seminar, we will study a small selection of traditional Jewish mystical sources in historical and cultural context, and then trace their use in 20th and 21st century culture.

COURSE OBJECTIVES:

1. Defining kabbalah
2. Learning to examine the use of religious primary sources
3. Learning how their meanings change in different contexts and in different media
4. Acquiring tools for analyzing religious texts
5. Acquiring tools for analyzing some aspects of contemporary culture like comics and film
6. Learning research skills
7. Learning writing skills
8. Learning study skills
9. Learning oral presentation skills

TEXTBOOKS YOU ARE REQUIRED TO PURCHASE:

1. David Ariel: The Mystic Quest Schocken
2. Superman in the Seventies: DC Comics, 2000
3. Scott McCloud's Understanding Comics Harper Paperbacks, 1994
4. Promethea, books 3 and 4 America's Best
5. The Golem and the Wondrous Deeds of the Maharal of Prague. Yudel Rosenberg, edited and translated by Curt Leviant
6. Abraham, Pearl. Seventh Beggar, Riverhead Books, 2005
7. **Optional:** Cultural Studies and the Study of Popular Culture: Theories and Methods, by John Storey, University of Georgia Press, 1993

Course requirements:

1. Attendance is mandatory
2. Class participation is an extremely important part of your experience in this seminar. **(10%)**
3. Quizzes and in-class exercises **(15%)**
4. Two Oral Presentations: 7.5 points apiece for a total of **(15%)** Oral presentation guidelines may be found appended to the back of the syllabus.
5. Four mini-papers (5% apiece for a total of **20%**)

6. Final Exam (40%)
7. Your final grade will consist of the sum of credit gained by meeting the above requirements. Please note that research papers must follow the guidelines appended to the syllabus, and that grading will be based on adherence to that criteria

Weeks 1 & 2 Intro Kabbalah

Thurs 9/6

1. Introducing Kabbalah, ideas of popular religion, and popular culture
 - A. In-class exploration - how does kabbalah really work?
 - B. Optional: Borowitz: Judaism: An Overview

Week 2

1. Mon, 9/10: Getting Oriented with Sarah
2. Tues, 9/11; What is kabbalah? David Ariel's *Mystic Quest* Chapter 1;
3. Thurs, 9/13 no class Rosh HaShanah

Group question:

From what you have read, is kabbalah part of traditional Jewish practice? Why or why not?

Week 3: Intro Kabbalah

1. Mon, 9/17 Group discussion with Sarah
2. Tues, 9/18 *Mystic Quest*, Chapter 2
3. Thurs, 9/20 Sefer Yetsirah

Week 4:

1. Monday, 9/24 An exercise in reading strange things: Making heads or tails of Sefer Yetsirah- what does this text tell us about how to read it, and what it's for?
2. Tuesday, 9/25 Sefer Yetsirah continued, Janowitz on letters and numbers
3. Thursday, 9/27 Intro Kabbalah of letters and numbers: Judah al-botini, from *Understanding Jewish Mysticism* (coursepack)

Mini-paper number one due today, Monday, 10/1

Topic: Use the sources we've read to define mysticism and how it works.

Week 5:

1. Monday, 10/1: Fun with Sarah
1. Tuesday, 10/2
 - A. Arthur Green: A Guide to the Zohar, pp 3-59
 - B. Zohar: Account of Creation, from Tishby
2. Thursday, 10/4 Intro Zohar: The Sefirot, from Tishby (coursepack)

Week 6: Monday, 10/8:

NOTE for week 6: You are REQUIRED to attend the lectures for the conference on Contemporary Kabbalah, (Kabbalah: Right Now!) occurring at Skidmore College, Monday evening at 7 pm, and Tuesday evening at 7 pm in Davis Auditorium. I encourage you to ask questions of the speakers.

By Monday 10/8, please read:

1. Boaz Huss: The New Age of Kabbalah.
Watch the Kabbalah Centre's video. "Discover Kabbalah"
<http://tv.kabbalah.com/categories.php?cPath=522>
Also, view the "intro Zohar" video
2. Tuesday, 10/9 come to class prepared with questions to ask visiting scholars about their talks last night

3. Thursday, 10/11: read Jody Myers' article, "Kabbalah and New Religious Movements in America in the 1960s - 80s" and discuss it in terms of what we know contemporary kabbalah.

GOLEM!

Week 7

1. Monday, 10/15
2. Tuesday, 10/16: Emily Bilski and Moshe Idel, from *Golem! Danger, Deliverance, and Art*. Ch. 1: Golem: an Historical Overview
3. Chapters 2 – 4: Curt Leviant's Translation of Yudl Rosenberg's *Golem*

Week 8:

1. Monday, 10/23: Thinking about papers and research projects
2. Tuesday, 10/24 The Golem: Rosenberg Pages 15-46
3. Thursday, 10/26 Rosenberg pp130-187

Mini-Paper number 2 due 10/30

Topic: Discuss the relationship between the source texts we've read so far, including the Sefer Yetsirah and the account of Judah al-Botini, and one of its contemporary manifestations, either in contemporary culture as described by our guest speakers, or in Rosenberg's account of the Golem.

Week 9

1. Monday, 10/29 Popular Culture and Popular Religion: guest speaker
2. Tuesday, 10/30: Scott McCloud's Understanding Comics, part 1
3. Thursday, 11/1: Understanding Comics, part 2

Week 10

1. Monday, 11/5 Guest speaker. Read : S No. 248/1, Feb 1972: "The Man Who Murdered the Earth! And S No.258/1, Nov 1972: "Fury of the Energy-Eater!"
2. Tuesday, The People of the Comic Book: Jewish Men and the Creation of Comic Book Superheroes, Harry Brod
3. Reread Zohar selection, begin Promethea

Week 11

1. Monday. 11/12 Guest speaker Richard Calo on Alan Moore and Promethea. For this, read as much as you can of 20-32
2. Tuesday, 11/13 Promethea cont'd
3. Thursday, 11/15 Finish Promethea, up to 32

Mini-paper number three due Tuesday, 11/20

Topic: Discuss one of the graphic novels we've read so far, particularly in terms of the way it uses kabbalah to imagine its setting. Pay special attention to the ways in which the message is altered because the medium is.

Novels

Week 12: Letter Mysticism & Film

- A. Monday, 11/19
2. Tuesday, 11/20 How to read a film: from *Cultural Studies*
3. Thursday: NO CLASS Thanksgiving Break- Over the break please reread:
 - B. The writings of Abulafia's disciple: from *Heart and the Fountain*
 - C. The Account of Judah al-Botini: Jewish Mystical Testimonies

(N-Z) What kind of work does the golem do in this work? How is he used to articulate ideas about artistic creation? How is the golem used to imagine a new identity for the main characters in this book, and to relate to an older one? What is the significance of comics here?

Week 13: Bee Season

1. Monday, 11/26: Differences in the second reading? Discussion of papers.
2. Tuesday, 11/27 Watch *Bee Season* at library, discuss in class
3. Thursday, 1/29
 - A. Tales of Nahman of Bratslav, Seven Beggars
 - B. Arnold Band: The Bratslav Theory of the Sacred Tale

(N-Z) In this film, the power of letters and numbers are used for profit. How is this different from the other ways in which we have seen letters and numbers used so far? How does this speak to contemporary society?

Week 14:

1. Monday, December 3: Research paper workshop
2. Tuesday, December 4 Seventh Beggar Part 1
3. Thursday, December 6. Seventh Beggar, cont'd

Week 15: Seventh Beggar

1. Monday, December 10: Hasidism: site visit
2. Tuesday, December 11. Seventh Beggar, Part 2 discussion; Huss on Neo-Hasidism

Mini-Paper number four due, Tuesday, December 11:

Paper topic: Discuss the role of story in Hasidism and in Abraham's book, *The Seventh Beggar*. Pay special attention to the last part of the book, with the storytelling festival.

Mini-Paper Guidelines:

- You should hand in the papers in class, on the day that they are listed on the syllabus.
- Your papers should answer the questions listed on the syllabus.
- A total of four papers are due.
- Each paper is worth five points of your final grade.
- Response papers should be two to three pagers long.
- Each page should be double-spaced, 12-point Times font, with 1-inch margins all around.
- The paper should have a cover page, with your name, the date, and the name of the course. It should also include the title of the paper.
- Each response paper must be written in proper essay form,
- with a clearly articulated argument, which is introduced in the first paragraph,
- and proven and developed in the body of the paper.
- The ideas set forth in the introduction and develop in the body of the paper should be summarized in the conclusion. The conclusion should also explain the implications of the work you have done in the earlier parts of the paper.
- All sources must be properly cited according to either MLA or Chicago style.
- Some of the basics in source citation include placing quotation marks around all text you have borrowed from another source, and naming that source, its author and the page number.
- Papers that do not meet these guidelines will not be graded.

Oral Presentation Guidelines:

1. Oral Presentations will be five to seven minutes long.
2. Each presentation should contain three parts:
 - A. A statement explaining the main point of the material we've covered
 - B. A statement of what struck you as interesting or important about the work
 - C. One question for class discussion
3. Students should refer to reading material and include page numbers as they discuss material so that the class can follow.
4. Students must hand me a printed outline of the material they presented in the class on the day that they present. This is part of your grade.
5. You should practice your delivery, and time yourself to make sure that you are on target for the length of the presentation.
6. The presentations will be graded on the basis of the quality of preparation and analysis, and adherence to these guidelines

Oral Presentation Evaluation Sheet

1. You must include quotations from the textual sources you discuss in your paper. The proper way to use a quote includes three steps:
 - A. You introduce and contextualize the quote.
 - B. You cite it properly according to MLA or Chicago style guidelines

- C. You conclude by analyzing the quote and showing how it supports your point.
 - D. Here is a very simple example: (A) In Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*, the main character justifies his desire to practice three religions by espousing a universalist understanding of religion, asserting that "the God of the Hebrews and the Christians is the same as the God of the Muslims!" (B) (Martel, p 72) (C) In this, Piscine expresses his belief that because these three religions work toward the same goal, serving the same God, he is justified in practicing both Christianity and Islam.
2. I am going to say this again. **All quotations must be cited properly**, strictly adhering to either **Chicago** or **MLA** style. I will not grade a paper that does not cite sources properly, so be sure to get this right. If you have any questions about this, refer to the following websites:
http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/DocMLACitation_Quot.html
http://www.unlv.edu/Writing_Center/Chicago%20Style.htm
 3. You must write your paper on materials covered in this course, before the due date of the paper. You may add to materials covered in the course, but course materials must remain the focus of your paper.
 4. You must use full-text sources in your paper. In other words, if you use a source in the paper you must have read the whole article and not just a small part of it. If you use a novel you must have read the whole novel.
 5. You may use secondary sources, but they must be printed sources. The only acceptable electronic sources are appropriately documented **full-text** works from reputable websites (i.e. a university or a scholarly organization). No other electronic sources will be acceptable.
 6. Failure to cite your sources properly is **plagiarism** and will be treated as such.
 7. **Plagiarism is VERY bad and it can get you expelled. I prosecute.**

Late Assignments Policy:

I do NOT accept late assignments. All late assignments will receive a grade of zero.